

Customer Relationship Management: An Analysis on the Practices of Food and Grocery Retail Establishments

¹Lalchhantluangi Pachuau, ²Prof. NVR. Jyoti Kumar

¹Ph.D Scholar, Department of Commerce, Mizoram University, Aizawl, 796004.

²Professor and Supervisor, Department of Commerce, Mizoram University, Aizawl, 796004.

ABSTRACT: The paper focus on Customer Relationship Management by Food and Grocery Retail Establishments in the small tribal economy of Mizoram. The study emphasises on the CRM practices of the retailers whilst taking into account the perception of the customers. The paper aims to find whether the CRM practices are communicated and perceived by the customers as aimed and practiced by the retailers. The study is an exploratory study based on primary data through structured questionnaire. Statistical tools such as Weighted Score, Maximum Possible Score, Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test, Pearson's Correlation and Spearman's Correlation. The findings of the study highlights the practices of retail establishments that is actually communicated and perceived to be effective by the customers as well as those which proves to be ineffective and not communicated well enough by the retailers.

Keywords: Customer Relationship Management, Food and Grocery, Retail Establishments, Consumer Behaviour, Customer Perception

I. INTRODUCTION:

Loyalty of customers arises from building relationships with them which would in turn bring a strong foundation of loyalty. Good loyalty programs have the power to reconstruct a business into a customer centric profit machine (Javalgi and Moberg, 2019). Customer Relationship Management (CRM) brings about the success of a business in the long term. Building a strong, sustainable relationship with the customers can ultimately lead to improved repertoire and can lead to increase of bottom-line profits (Kotler, et al, 2021). In the opinion of O'Malley (2006), knowledge of the customers' needs, wants and feedback is supreme in today's competitive business world. It can be used as a leverage to foster loyalty by treating each customer as an important individual for the business.

According to the Global data report, the Food and grocery Sector is the largest retail sector in India with an opportunity worth of US\$ 560 billion and contributes more than 65% of the total retail spending in the country. It is estimated that the organized retail sector in India is estimated to reach US\$ 60 billion by 2025. The Food and grocery sector is growing at 8% CAGR annually which has been a result of increase in per capita income, urbanization and the increase in number of nuclear families in India. Other key drivers of growth include conversion of food and grocery items from unpackaged to packages, premiumization and the increasing demand for convenience among consumers. The retail market had total revenue of US\$ 611 billion in 2021 with a CAGR of 13.2% between the years 2016 and 2021.

With the ever-evolving lifestyle and purchase habits of consumers, there has been a rapid increase in the shift of consumers to modern retail stores offering a number of goods especially quality and fresh food and grocery items instead of local stores and street vendors (Kumar, 2018). Convenience stores are also gaining popularity in urban clusters to cater the busy lifestyle that people have now-a-days (Prasad and Aryasri, 2018). According to the McKinsey report, 80% of the total retail spend in the country accounts for conventional categories such as staples and fresh food and grocery, packaged snacks, confectionary and beverages are emerging and fast growing in terms of retail spending. Non-conventional food and grocery are increasing at a compounded rate of 15% annually since 2017 till 2022.

With the onset of e-Commerce revolution in India, online grocery retail sector has been growing at a fast pace. In 2021, the online grocery sales in India reached US\$ 3 billion and is expected to grow within the next five years with projected CAGR of 50-55%. The growth of online grocery retail is also the result of more than 25 million users of e-commerce in 2021 which stood at 12 million in 2019. The driving forces of e-Grocery includes the growing preference for convenience, value offerings and larger number of assortment available online. The covid-19 pandemic has also been a moving force in the rapid rise of e-Grocery with factors such as

lockdown, better hygiene and safety. The pandemic induced restrictions saw the growth of e-grocery by nearly 75% in 2020 prior to it being only 20% before the pandemic.

As of 2020, the leading Food and grocery retailers in India include Reliance Retail which is the largest grocery retail chain in terms of sales and outlets, followed by Big Bazaar, DMart, Star Bazaar, Spar and Spencer's.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

a. *CRM in Retail Marketing*

Bose (2002) studied the need for CRM since there exist differences in preference of customers and their purchase habits especially in retail businesses. The study explained the need for CRM due to such existence of differences. Therefore, the understanding of drivers of customers and profitability of the customers and enhancement of customer portfolio *to increase overall satisfaction and loyalty*.

Kaur (2018) studied the CRM in online grocery stores and found that core service factors such as price, quality, home delivery, return options and variety of payment methods were the major influences in such stores. Retail strategies such as customer satisfaction feedback, surprise gifts and bonus referral points are the most effective CRM strategies.

Ramesh and Rao (2019) studied the CRM in retail marketing with reference to the Food and Grocery section of Big Bazaar and found that CRM is one of the most important competitive factor for big organised retailers. Highly trained and motivated employees proved to be an effective strategy of CRM and is also the most influential initiator of satisfaction among the customers.

Mathur and Samma (2020) conducted a study on the practices of CRM in organized retail stores. The study revealed that keeping purchase records and personal information of customers would enhance CRM and would be an effective way to analyse the buying behaviour of the customers. The study suggested the importance of personalized touch to the customers to encourage the increase in frequency of visits. Special training to staff is highly emphasized for the maintenance of a strong CRM.

b. *Consumer Behaviour*

Laldinliana and Jyoti Kumar (2012) studied the consumer behaviour in the tribal economy of Northeast India regarding various durables and non-durable goods. The study shows that the choicest factor influencing buying behaviour of food and grocery items is health and well-being. The study also revealed that in terms of personal care products, price played an important role for the selection of products and brands. The study further showed that in term of consumer durables such as household electrical appliances, promotion played the most important role in selection and purchase of such products.

Lalrindiki and Kumar (2015) examined the attitude and behaviour of online retail consumers in Aizawl city and found that majority of the buyers in their study comprises of 21-30 years of age. Their study found that the quality of the website, the quality of the product, the provision of customer services along with the overall functions of the online retailers are the main focus of consumers when selecting online retail stores. Their study suggests that online retailers need to identify user friendly technology and applications for purchase.

III. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

There exists a necessity to plan to achieve the most effective responses from the customers which plays an important role in the promotional effort. Public relations is a managerial function for the evaluation of public attitudes and perceptions which enables any business to identify policies and procedures that would align with the public interest and make necessary plans and programs to earn public understanding (Payne, et al, 2012). Sales promotion with the combination of other promotional tools to supplement the increase of sales as well as communicate to the customers on a more intimate scale (Kumar and Pereira, 2014).

'Retail' is one of the oldest forms of businesses in India and has gone through major transformation over the years. At present, India is one of the world's fastest retail markets, driven by robust investment within the country as well as through FDI.

There are several studies highlighting the marketing strategies adopted by different retail businesses in India. However, such studies are of less relevance in the context of North-East region. Some of the studies conducted in the tribal economy of the region focused on the behavioural aspects of the customers. For example, Laldinliana and Jyoti Kumar (2012) studied the buying behaviour of the urban and rural customers in Mizoram covering various durable and non-durable products. In their study, Lalrindiki and Kumar (2015) attempted to study the buying attitudes of online retail customers in Aizawl. Zothanchhungi (2021) also studied the online buying behaviour of retail customers. None of the studies attempted to study the marketing practices with emphasis on CRM adopted by the retail business establishments. Therefore, there exists a serious research gap in terms of the study of marketing practices being followed by the retail businesses in Mizoram.

Moreover, the study of marketing of retail establishments becomes very relevant in the context of its growth potential and the employment it is expected to provide across the country. Against this backdrop, the

present study of Customer Relationship Management strategies adopted by the retail establishments located in Mizoram, a small remote state in the North-East India assumes importance.

For the purpose of the present study, Food and grocery retail has been selected since it is the largest category of retail business in India and assumes relevance in the small tribal state of Mizoram.

IV. OBJECTIVES

- To understand and identify the Customer Relationship Management followed by Food and Grocery Retail Establishments.
- To study the expectations of CRM and actual experiences of the customers of Food and Grocery Retail Establishments.
- To study and compare the CRM practices of Retail Establishments and the actual perception of such practices by the customers.

V. METHODOLOGY

The study is an Exploratory Research to understand in detail the concept and extent of Food and Grocery Retail Establishments in Aizawl City.

Data Collection:

Primary Data: The study depends mostly on primary data sources. Primary data is collected through structured questionnaire for Food and Grocery retailers in Aizawl City who are registered under the Department of Taxation, Government of Mizoram. Consumer Survey is also done through structured questionnaire.

Secondary Data: Secondary data is collected from Government reports i.e Statistical Handbooks, Taxation Department, Govt. of Mizoram, reports of previous researches, academic journals, trade associations, magazines, newspapers and records of small-scale retail units proposed to be studied.

Scope of Coverage: The study covers small scale Food and Grocery retail units in Aizawl City who are Tax Assesses under the Department of Taxation, Government of Mizoram Area of Coverage and the customers of such retail establishments. The area of study is limited to Aizawl City.

Sample Size: 30 Food and Grocery Retail Establishments and 500 customers.

Accordingly, the sample distribution for the retailer and customer survey is divided in zonal areas as shown in Table 1.

Statistical Tools: Statistical tools such the simple percentage, mean value, mode, weighted score and maximum possible score (MPS) are applied using SPSS. Statistical analysis such as Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test, Pearson's Correlation and Spearman's correlation are also used to test for correlation and the existence of significant differences.

VI. ANALYSIS

Analysis of Demography of Food and Grocery Retailers and their customers is presented in Table 2. Nearly two-third of the retailers belong to the middle-aged group (31-40 years of age). Gender-wise, the ratio of men and women are more or less the same. Regarding educational qualification, almost 75% of the retailers are at least graduates. Nearly half of the retailers earn an annual income of Rs.3-6 lakhs.

With regards to the customers under the study, the middle-aged people (31-40 years of age) play an active role in purchasing their family requirements, followed by the younger generation (20-30 years). Gender-wise, nearly two-third of the respondents are women. 35% of the respondents are men. Regarding educational qualification, more than half of them are graduates and above and almost 45% of them had secondary and primary level education. None of them are illiterates which is justifiable due to the high literacy rate of Mizoram at 91.58% (2021).

The Table 3 presents the comparative analysis of the marketing communication methods adopted by the retail establishments and the actual perception of the customers.

The different modes of marketing communications identified are: Advertisements in newspapers and Local channels, Social media, Leaflets, Exhibitions/trade shows, Sales personnel and Radio. Since, $Z=0.378$, $p=0.705$, where $Z < 1.96$ and $p > 0.05$. there exists no significant difference in the methods used by the retail establishments to communicate with the customers and the actual communication methods from which customers receive information. In Z score, Negative Ranks < Positive Ranks, thus retail communication by retailers is the actual communication methods received by the customers.

Most of the retailers under the study are making use of the present booming technological advances and taking an advantage on the growing Internet presence. This has been proven to be one of the most effective means of communication for businesses to their customers (Kolter *et al*, 2017). Although the Internet has absorbed most of our lives, newspapers still play a very important role for ads and communication to customers.

An interesting finding in the study is that although the numbers are low, traditional modes of communication such as radio are still used by the retailers under the study.

From the customers perspective, certain portion of the customers receive communications through the traditional media which are advertisements in local channels and newspapers. This implies that retailers should also give importance to these media since a large portion of the customers rely on them as a means for marketing communications.

Although more than one-fourth of the retailers rely on their sales personnel for their marketing communications to the customers, the findings revealed that the market communications from sales personnel are quite insignificant in the opinion of the customers. This implies that sales personnel do not contribute much to the communications despite the high reliability by the retailers. As such, retailers should give more focus on the traditional and New Media for marketing communications for further growth and reach to the current customers as well as potential customers.

The Table 4 shows the analysis of the different strategies adopted to retain their existing customers and the actual perception of the customers of the reasons why they are loyal to such retail establishments.

Based on literature reviewed (e.g. Suguna and Mathipoorani, 2016), six relevant methods were identified: Building relationships, Stable pricing, Assured supply, Maintaining quality, Good Reception, Prompt response of queries.

Since, $Z=5.279$, $p=0.000$, where $Z>1.96$ and $p < 0.05$. there exists significant difference in the strategies adopted by the retail establishments in the retention of customers and the actual perception of the customers on how they are retained to be loyal customers. In Z score, Negative Ranks > Positive Ranks, implying that the strategies adopted by the retailers are not the actual reasons of loyalty among the customers.

The retailers under the study take great effort to retain their customers since their main focus is to build relationship and provide preferential treatment to their loyal customers. Interestingly, stable pricing and standard quality are not much focused for retention. This finding can be due to the fact that stable pricing of products and providing standard quality products are existing strategies and objectives being followed by the retailers under the study.

However, from the customers point of view, when shoppers walk in the shop, their first experience is the reception and the front desk. The interaction they experience greatly impact their perception loyalty. As per the findings, the customers reveal that the most important strategy that enhances their loyalty from the retailers is good reception. The retail store offerings may be vast with multi-brands and different quality of goods, customers can have a number of queries and may require in depth information of the products that they are interested in or may not understand the information that comes with the products offered.

The customers also reveal that they their loyalty lies in the courteous and prompt response of their queries from the retailers while shopping in their stores as well as being assisted with choosing the right products for them.

The Table 5 shows the means of responding to customer complaints by the retail establishments and the actual means perceived by the customers as to how their complaints are being handled.

Based on literature (e.g. Chiguvi, D, 2020), five important ways of responding to negative feedback from customers were identified and presented. Such responses include: Apologizing to customers, accept customers demand, respond positively, discarding complaints and taking necessary actions.

Since, $Z=4.676$, $p=0.000$, where $Z>1.96$ and $p < 0.05$. there exists significant difference in the strategies adopted by the retail establishments in their opinion on how they respond to the complaints of the customers and the actual perception of the customers on how their grievances are being handled by the retailers. In Z score, Negative Ranks > Positive Ranks, and taking into account the mean ranks, the responses to complaints by the retailers are much more than as perceived by the customers.

The retailers under the study in their opinion handle complaints fairly well since majority of attempt to satisfy the customers by taking necessary actions and apologizing to the customers. Interestingly, very few retailers resort to discard the complaints of customers implying that most retailers take a note of the complaints and take necessary actions which is very optimistic. Retailers should be well aware that all complaints and deficiencies should be handled in the most positive manner to retain customers and increase satisfaction along with an overall pleasant retail experience.

From the customers' point of view, the most significant mode of expression of complaints is through oral complaints. This implies that the majority of the customers are straight forward and tell the retailers in person. Although, this is a dissatisfaction, it is a very positive finding since it implies that customers are voicing their opinions directly to the retailers. In this way, the retailers can also take necessary actions based on the complaints and make amends with the customers.

However, the comparative analysis reveal that most customers feel that their complaints are disregarded and corrective measures are seldom taken by the retailers. Making excuses and unavailability of expert sales person exists when their problems are being raised especially when it comes to the contents of food, their expiry as well as the nutritional aspects of their products.

The Table 6 shows the different aspects that the customers of Food and Grocery face with the retail establishments.

'High prices' is the main problem faced by the customers from the retailers with weighted score of 1923 at 77.89% to MPS (mean value=2.34). The second most prevalent problem faced by the customers is 'Discriminatory prices' with weighted score of 1810 at 75.63% to MPS (mean value=2.27). The third most prevalent problem faced by the customers is 'Pressure selling' with weighted score of 1760 at 70.47% to MPS (mean value=2.14).

The least prevalent problems faced by the customers are: Poor quality (weighted score=1164) and Adulteration (weighted score=1164).

The finding revealed that majority of the customers under the study face the problem of high pricing. This implies that although the retailers aim to price their goods at fair and affordable prices, the customers are facing problems regarding their pricing. High pricing of goods may ward off existing customers and potential customers. Therefore, it is advisable that the retailers under the study review their prices and avail the goods at more affordable prices for the customers.

Another prevalent problem faced by the customers is 'Discriminatory prices'. This is a very prevalent practice in the Mizoram retail market since goods are taken from different suppliers from different places and hence, pricing of such goods may differ from seller to seller especially for products unmarked with MRP. However, these dissatisfactions and problems seldom lead to the customers taking actions in consumer courts. Mizoram is a close-knit society where cultural norms and societal practices of peace is inculcated within the values of the people. Therefore, taking actions through the court of law is less prevalent in any type of dissatisfaction especially when it comes to purchase of goods and services. Lack of knowledge of rights is also still a prevalent force in the society.

VII. SUGGESTIONS

- Customer Feedback for Evaluation of Employees:

Feedback of customers for business, for any aspect of the business, be it positive or negative, is a staple for any business to identify their strengths, weaknesses and opportunities. In retail businesses where majority of the businesses employ personnel for sales, after sales services, customer feedback should be taken into account. The interaction between the customers and employees can greatly impact the shopping experience. Since employees are the first-hand interaction that customers have within the shops, their feedback would prove to be a valuable one. Evaluation of employees by the customers would enable the businesses to recognize certain gaps that may exist to determine the ability of the sales force and the hiring needs as well. Their feedback with provide information on the need for potential training, improvement of service as well as recognition of excellent employees.

- Training of Workforce:

Training of workforce by the retail establishments would prove to be very beneficial since a formal training would enable the employees to be well informed of the products they are selling and clearly communicate to the customers. Well informed sales personnel would ultimately lead to customer satisfaction and earn the confidence of buyers. Before the Covid era, training of employees were expensive with onsite instructors and long training programmes and hence, not much practiced especially among small businesses. However, with the rise of blended modes of training such as online courses, trainings are now more cost effective than ever. So, such trainings should be imparted among the employees. As per the findings, retailers should specially focus on training their employees on aspects regarding courteous treatment of customers, recognition of regular customers, punctuality of services and their ability to solve the problems of customers.

- Practice of Affordable and Reasonable Pricing Strategies:

The right pricing strategy can make or break a product in the market. Certain products may be priced in MRP where manipulation by sellers is impossible. However, for Food and Grocery retail businesses sold from outside India with unmarked MRP or MRP in foreign languages not understood by the Mizo's, reasonable and affordable strategies should be taken. In a state like Mizoram, where the market is the price maker, it is advisable that retailers form unions to control and stabilize prices depending on the type of product, quality of product and place of procurement. This would ensure the dilution of over pricing by certain sellers who sell products to earn above normal profits and also sell to those who can afford it at its highest price. This would also ensure equality of profits among different sellers along with safeguarding customers from paying more than what they get in return.

VIII. CONCLUSION

Customer Relationship Management is one of the most relevant and significant attribute of marketing strategy in today’s ever evolving, ever competitive world. Every business, big or small, has the potential of building a strong customer base with by inculcating a strong Customer Relationship Management. Building CRM through notable strategies such as communicating to the customers with information on existing and new products through ‘New Media’ with the use of social media platforms such as Instagram, Whatsapp, Facebook, Youtube, etc. which are also very cost efficient and spreads across millions of users. Retention of customers through the building of relationship with customers, good reception and prompt response to customers’ enquiries and problems would prove to me one of the best practices of CRM especially in the Food and Grocery retail sector.

Responding to complaints by customers build a strong foundation among the customers implying that businesses require efficient and well-trained staff to interact and provide services to the customers. CRM also involves prioritizing customers to provide good quality products with an efficient pricing system. Pricing determines the monetary value of products and services and is not just a figure on a tag. The right pricing policy is essential for every type business, as it is the most important factor determining the existence and growth of business.

Annexure

Table 1: Sample Size of Food and Grocery Retail Establishments and Customer Survey

Retail Survey	No. of Retail Units	Customer Survey	No. of Customers
Aizawl North Zone	10	Aizawl North Zone	150
Aizawl South Zone	9	Aizawl South Zone	150
Aizawl East Zone	8	Aizawl East Zone	120
Aizawl West Zone	3	Aizawl West Zone	80
Total	30		150

Table 2: Demographic Profile

Age (in years)	Criteria	Frequency (Retailers)	Frequency (Customers)
	Below 20	1 (3.3)	43 (8.6)
	21-30	5 (16.7)	113 (22.6)
	31-40	12 (40.0)	84 (16.8)
	41-50	10 (33.3)	176 (35.2)
	51-60	-	68 (13.6)
	Above 60	2 (6.5)	16 (3.2)
	Total	30 (100)	500 (100)
Gender	Criteria	Frequency (Retailers)	Frequency (Customers)
	Male	14 (46.7)	172 (34.4)
	Female	16 (53.3)	328 (65.6)
	Total	30 (100)	500 (100)
Education	Criteria	Frequency (Retailers)	Frequency (Customers)
	Primary	-	23 (4.6)
	Secondary	8 (26.7)	210 (42.0)
	Graduate	19 (63.3)	186 (37.2)
	Post Graduate	3 (10.0)	61 (12.2)
	Above Post Graduate	-	20 (4.0)
	Total	30 (100)	500 (100)
Annual Income (in Rs)	Criteria	Frequency (Retailers)	Frequency (Customers)
	Below 3 lakhs	4 (13.3)	123 (24.6)
	3 lakhs – 6 lakhs	14 (46.7)	171 (34.2)

	6 lakhs – 9 lakhs	2 (6.7)	91 (18.2)
	9 lakhs – 12 lakhs	9 (30.0)	56 (11.2)
	12 lakhs – 15 lakhs	-	36 (7.2)
	Above 15 lakhs	1 (3.3)	23 (4.6)
	Total	30 (100)	500 (100)

Source: Primary Data

Table 3: Comparison of Marketing Communication Methods by Retail Establishments and Actual Perception of Customers

Marketing Communications adopted– Customer Perception	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Negative Ranks	125 ^a	45.58	2006.00
Positive Ranks	135 ^b	47.40	2121.00
Ties	240 ^c		
Total	500		
Z	-0.378^d		
Asymp Sig (2 tailed)	0.705		

- a. Retail Communication < Communication Perception
- b. Retail Communication > Communication Perception
- c. Retail Communication = Communication Perception
- d. Based on Negative Ranks

Source: Primary Data

Table 4: Comparison of Customer Retention Strategies by Retail Establishments and Actual Perception of Customers

Customer Retention Strategies – Customer Perception	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Negative Ranks	245 ^a	58.18	4902.00
Positive Ranks	109 ^b	51.47	1515.00
Ties	146 ^c		
Total	500		
Z	-5.279^d		
Asymp Sig (2 tailed)	0.000		

- a. Customer Retention < Communication Perception
- b. Customer Retention > Communication Perception
- c. Customer Retention = Communication Perception
- d. Based on Positive Ranks

Source: Primary Data

Table 5: Comparison of Responses to Customer Complaints by Retail Establishments and Actual Perception of Customers

Responses to Customer Complaints – Customer Perception	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks
Negative Ranks	245 ^a	49.49	3812.00
Positive Ranks	109 ^b	54.97	1251.00
Ties	146 ^c		
Total	500		
Z	-4.676^d		
Asymp Sig (2 tailed)	0.000		

- a. Responses to Complaints < Communication Perception
- b. Responses to Complaints > Communication Perception
- c. Responses to Complaints = Communication Perception
- d. Based on Positive Ranks

Source: Primary Data

Table 6.: Main Problems faced with Food and Grocery Retail Establishments

(Score)

Problems	Weighted Score	Weighted Mean	% to MPS	Rank
High prices	1923	2.34	77.89	1
Discriminatory prices	1810	2.27	75.63	2
False information	1194	1.70	56.73	4
Pressure selling	1760	2.14	70.47	3
Limited product range	1338	1.67	55.78	5
Poor quality	1156	1.48	52.67	7
Adulteration	1164	1.54	54.67	6

Source: Primary Data

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¹Lalchhantluangi Pachuau,

¹Ph.D Scholar, Department of Commerce, Mizoram University, Aizawl, 796004.